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ABSTRACT

The subjectivistic problem for knowledge and communication associated with philosopher Immanuel Kant is that everything we know may in fact be determined by the structure of our own minds and not by the actual nature of external reality. Ernst Cassirer's contribution to the solution of this problem is the notion of "symbols" produced by the knower that are shared cultural products rather than merely private means of individual understanding. Susanne Langer has developed the notion of symbol as important not only in the communication of experience but also in its formulation. Building on the work of these philosophers, a theory of symbol asserts that human nature lends itself so well to symbolizing that symbols tend to assume the central role in our perception of reality. Symbols are developed in symbolic interchange with others, by which we attain symbolic maturities. Implications of this theory for English educators include the following: it promises to unite the divergent "literature" and "communication" emphases in English education; it may explain the relationships of the various arts; it might provide a potential framework for analyzing the relationships among conceptual frameworks; and tolerance might result from the realization that our own cherished views are not "reality," but rather symbols. (DF)

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PREFACE TO A THEORY OF HUMAN SYMBOLIC INTERCHANGE:

An Essay on Communication

Occasional Paper No. 15

R. Glenn Martin

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FOREWORD IN LIEU OF AN ABSTRACT

I approve of abstracts and have been saved from reading many tedious documents by their authors' courtesy in letting me know ahead of time that I was not interested in what they had to say. In the present case, however, while I can offer no guarantee against tedium, I am loath to provide an abstract of what is itself already an abstract. The contents of this paper summarize a much larger unpublished body of prose and of doctrine. In essence, this larger document aims to provide a framework within which mankind's symbolic activities (languages, art , music, storytelling, dreaming, theory-building, etc.) can be seen as a single overarching theme or aspect of the human scene. Though my own perspective on this tremendous theme developed more or less independently of any single conscious source, I eventually realized that I was coming closest to the work of two major professional philosophers - Susanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer. It may be thought pretentious to mention a small effort like the present one in the same breath with the colossal contributions of these two great theorists of human symbolism, but I intend such mention here simply as a tribute to those who have done the most in this field and to whom any subsequent worker must look for the standard of competence and comprehensiveness in this area. That I have taken a different path from theirs is the only justification for having broken out of the respectful and somewhat awed silence that their work would otherwise have inspired in me!

The content of the paper may appear rather tenuously connected with specifically educational questions, but it had its origins in tribulations of the mind and the spirit which I have encountered in my work as a specialist in secondary-school English, and the concluding section of the paper sketches briefly the sort of significance which I hope the views expounded here might have for this educational specialty. There is also, I think, a strong *prima facie* case to be made for the potential significance of any insightful treatment of communication for the educational process generally.

I hope I have not unduly invaded the territory of professional philosophers. Some strands of what appears here probably date back as far as my own adolescent days as an undergraduate philosophy major at Harvard, in an era in which Harvard had an incredible galaxy of world-ranking philosophers in residence (including Carnap, Quine, Whitehead, Russell, Perry, and others). Not much that appears in this paper is any direct reflection of this early experience, exhilarating as it was. I had never heard of Cassirer at that time, nor of Langer, though I learned recently that she was apparently in Cambridge when I was, and probably attended the same meetings of the Philosophy Club that I did. I am not, however, a professional academic philosopher, and I have been led to the notions contained in this monograph by a very different route, academically and vocationally. A serious interest in the larger questions of human symbolic activity leads one through a half-dozen or more disciplines and finds a secure home in none of them.

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I think that answers to some of these questions are vitally needed by my own academic specialty in English curriculum and, almost equally, by education generally. So although these questions might well be pursued simply because of their own great inherent interest, I offer this treatment of them as a contribution to what I think is a felt need within my own educational specialty for much greater clarity about them. This is also with the understanding, as with the other papers in this series, that the present effort is an informal early step toward the further development of the ideas it contains, and that response and feedback to it, especially of a challenging and critical sort, will be very welcome indeed, from anyone who may have the interest to provide it.

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I. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS

A.
The Individual, Communication, and the External World

We live in an intellectual era saturated with talk about interpersonal relations and communication but in which the predominant assumptions are, at least in the western democracies, highly individualistic and even subjective. A certain tension, therefore, seems to me at the very heart of the modern Zeitgeist. We are appropriately concerned, in the tradition of political freedom, with the dignity and the rights of the individual, but at the same time we are convinced that we must greatly improve the kinds of relations that exist between people and among groups of people. As individualists we see each particular human being (starting with ourselves as the one closest at hand) set dramatically against a background of all other people and indeed the whole rest of the physical universe, in ways that nearly always involve conflict and, as an unavoidable price of this conflict, some constraints on individual freedom. But as what might be called "interpersonalists," we see the highest attainable good for our species in some kind of optimal human relations that transcend the self-contained framework of the individual; and in this context we see the constraint on individual freedom as a small price for the much more significant benefit, to each individual, of participation in the collective good.

The tension of this Zeitgeist is very great indeed if we cannot find major common ground between individual and collective welfare. Attempts to find this common ground date back, of course, at least as far as the "social contract" of Locke and Rousseau. But most working versions of the social contract and its ideological successors seem to me either to have sold out one side of the conflict or else created what amounts to a bad bargain on both sides!

The present endeavor is not the account of a new social contract, but it could be viewed as an essay in understanding better what the individual contributes to the collectivity of his or her fellow human beings and vice versa - especially with reference to the mysterious "inner life" which we all have but of which it is very difficult to make good public sense. If a theory can be constructed which shows, in terms a little more specific than the ones that are most readily available, that there is some type of harmony of interests between the individual and society, such a theory is likely to offer both theoretical interest and practical benefits.

What follows here is merely a proposed step in that direction. It can, thanks to the present state of knowledge and theory, draw on some of the twentieth-century ferment about communication and the basis, namely the symbol and its processes, on which communication rests. But it begins in an

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earlier era, with a look at a traditional problem closely related to the question of the "isolated" individual - namely what I am here calling "Kant's problem" - the very basic question of how we know anything about the world external to us, or even know that it exists.[1] The problem, however hackneyed, is important for our purposes in that it has underlain, for the past two centuries, the more obviously contemporary problem of "subjectivism." Until this problem is solved, the question of the individual versus, or in harmony with, his/her surroundings will remain perennially unresolved.

B. Kant's Problem

Immanuel Kant launched the modern era of theorizing about the role of subjective factors in our knowledge of the external world and therefore of each other as human beings. Descartes had earlier laid stress on the <u>self</u> as knower, but only in the simple sense that we must start somewhere and that the self is most ready at hand as a starting place in knowledge. Kant greatly ramified the notion of self-as-knower, supplying a detailed and complex picture of it as a collection of "categories" sufficient to explain the apparently complex world which the self appears to know about. Kant was certainly not, by modern standards, a "subjectivist" - and his mission, indeed, was to find plausible ways out of Descartes' "self" and into the full-fledged world as we know it. But to provide this escape from the limitations of self-as-knower, Kant had to suppose, first, that there is, "out there," a <u>reality</u> whose actual nature we may never really know, and, second, a very complex self at marked variance from the simple, innocent "knower" which we often quite unselfconsciously assume ourselves to be.

Prior to Kant, it had been largely taken for granted (at least since Plato) that we could safely take at face value our observations of the external world, though Bishop Berkeley and David Hume had raised important questions about how much of what we "observe" is actual observation and how much is added interpretation by our own minds. But Kant was the first thinker to deal seriously with the possibility that

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1. The present essay is not intended as scholarly critical exegesis on Kant, for which its scope is not appropriate nor its author qualified. What I am referring to here as "Kant's problem" is partly, of course, Berkeley and Hume's problem as well - namely, how do we know that there is an external world at all? And partly, it is the problem of how, if there is an external world, we process our experience of it in the ways in which we do. The first part of the problem Kant claims to have disposed of (<u>Critique of Pure Reason</u> trans. by N.K. Smith, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1965, pp.244-247), but the problem clearly survived his claim to have laid it to rest!

everything we know is in fact determined by the structure of our own minds and not by the actual nature of external reality (the Ding-an-sich, the "thing in itself"). Kant did not believe that the supposed external world is merely a projection of our inner self, but he took the notion seriously enough to provide a line of philosophical defense against it. He saw our experience with reality as an interaction between the actual nature of external reality (whatever that may "really" be) and the structure of our minds (including such categories as space, time, and causality) so designed as to make human sense out of the otherwise inscrutable world around us.

The problem vividly posed by Kant has never really been solved, and his work simply laid out the main agenda for what is now more than two centuries of subsequent theory and speculation on, or following from, the matters involved. While most philosophers have disagreed with Kant's attempted solution, and many even with his question, no one has been able either to supplant the agenda which he posed to his successors or to dispose of it definitively so that human speculation could, so to speak, really move on to the next thing. We remain, as far as any philosophical treatment of the problem goes, still isolated in ourselves, unable to verify conclusively, in any formal way, the existence of anything outside of our immediate awareness - created, for all we know (as Bertrand Russell once suggested), just a moment ago, complete with memories!

Not every philosopher, of course, would say that we are this badly off. Some have pointed out the irony of a solipsist trying to convince someone else that only he, the solipsist, exists. Philosophical realists have argued that we can be at least as sure of the existence of the external world as we are of the principles and concepts that cause us to question it. Idealists have invoked the fact that we can engage in this kind of philosophizing as evidence for the existence of ideas as much more immediate, transcendent, and compelling kinds of entities than the lowly order of material objects which prompted most of Hume's and some of Kant's speculations in the first place. Pragmatists have dismissed the question as not really making any practical difference and therefore failing to meet the minimum criterion of meaning - namely, that a difference or distinction, to be meaningful, must itself make some further difference. Positivists, on a related basis, have rejected the question itself as not implying any means by which an answer to it could be tested, so that, just as in the case of the pragmatists, the meaning of the question itself is formally rejected. These and other rejections of or purported solutions to Kant's basic question have appeared in the intervening years, but they have been less persistent and enduring than the question. And often they seem like evasions designed to suit someone's system or some needlessly exacting criterion of meaning - in either case a somewhat less than ingenuous response to a question that is assuredly

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comprehensible (whatever its formal "meaning") and probably, in balance, more illuminating than the proposed answers to it!

Besides the views of those who have either rejected the question or proposed definite "solutions" to it, the subjectivism in Kant's formulation has given rise to a subjectivist tradition that includes not only one aspect of the idealists, but a number of particular views concerned with developing and ramifying the conception of the self as knower and experiencer. There is the emphasis on the will in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, on individuality in Bosanquet, on vitality and dynamism in Bergson, on robust voluntarism in William James, on loneliness and the need for love and courage in a neglected aspect of Russell's work, on spiritual isolation (and the moral dilemmas this creates) in existentialism, and on individual intuition in phenomenology. Each of these views or schools of thought and perhaps several others, especially in psychology, could be regarded as "subjectivist" in the sense that focus is on the individual thinker, knower, feeler, experiencer confronting his or her own experience, attempting to derive sense and benefit from it, uncertain in greater or lesser degree as to the exact nature or status of the "external" world. One could suggest, of course, that these are typical products of the flowering of individualism in western culture and not specifically derivative from Kant's formulations, except that in most of the instances I have mentioned some acknowledgement to Kant is explicit. Truly enough, such subjective philosophies are a manifestation of the intensive western study of the individual, and Kant's work is itself obviously such a manifestation. But I think it is illuminating to keep such contributions within the Kantian framework, not as a tribute to the framework but as a means of recognizing the degree of consensus as to the significance of the problem. The problem (how objectively can we understand the world around us?) is not merely of surpassing theoretical interest. It is also close to the heart of the most pressing and intransigent problems of our time - the validity of democratic government that relies on the responsibility of its citizen-members, the rights and prerogatives of individuals vis-a-vis the collective security of society, the survival of individual dignity in a world threatened by overexpanding population that seems to jeopardize the significance of any individual life. These are problems - and there are many others, especially in psychology and education - whose working solutions depend heavily on accurate appraisals of the limits (if any) on individual competence and perspective (as contrasted, for instance, with the imposing by small numbers of people of political ideology or religion on the rest of the population); and the various treatments of what might be called simply "Kant's problem" can suggest vital theoretical underpinnings for possible solutions to our species' current dilemmas.

What follows is, in any case, intended in part as a contribution within the Kantian framework, though it has other motives as well, which will appear as the discussion proceeds.

C. Cassirer and Langer

Of major views within the Kantian framework, I have deferred to this point the two that are most germane to the present essay. I refer to those of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer.

Prior to the work of Cassirer, various terms had been used for, and various conceptions held of, the contents of the human mind - "thoughts," "ideas," "conceptions," etc., but the German philosopher Cassirer seems to have been the first to sense the astonishing dynamic possibilities of the notion or concept of "symbol." (The word is the same in German as in English.) In contrast with such relatively analytic and mechanical notions of symbols and signs as those of C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards (The Meaning of Meaning, 1923) and C.W. Morris (Signs, Language and Behavior, 1946), Cassirer, in his monumental The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (English translation by R. Manheim, 1955, from the original German Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, 3 vols., 1923-29), offers a comprehensive account of the role of symbolic processes in human knowledge and culture. Cassirer's own work was done directly within the tradition emanating from Kant, and included in fact the authorship of a substantial volume devoted explicitly to Kant (Kants Leben und Lehre, 1916).

Cassirer's essential contribution to the solution of what I am calling Kant's problem was to direct attention to the symbol (and more generally to symbolic expression) as an artifact produced by the knower as a means of knowing. Though in the same tradition, this is a substantially more active notion than the "categories" of the mind, especially insofar as the array of symbols considered by Cassirer, from the myths of primitive man through the complex formulations of contemporary science (in which Cassirer himself had substantial background), are shared cultural products rather than simply private means of individual understanding; in addition, Cassirer extended the domain of "symbolic forms" from the purely cognitive and intellectual emphasis in most theories of knowledge to religious and artistic manifestations of mankind's capacity to shape experience and interpret reality. Cassirer was thus both epistemologist and cultural anthropologist within his account of the genesis and uses of symbolic forms. Despite his stress on the public nature of symbols, his solution, with all of its significant innovations, remains essentially the same as Kant's, in the sense in which Kant sought to escape from subjectivism but was ultimately unable to do so. Cassirer acknowledges that

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> we still remain in a world of "images"... whose principle and origin are to be sought in an autonomous creation of the spirit. Through them alone we see what we call "reality," and in them alone we possess it: for the highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity.(Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1, p. 111.)

Later portions of the present essay will sketch some possible dimensions of a theory that might perhaps move a step further away from subjectivism than Cassirer was able to manage (though he did indeed seek vigorously to escape it - cf. Hendel's introduction to vol. 1, esp. p. 60). Needless to say, however, no one is likely in the near future to erect so impressive a tribute to the importance of symbolic activity in human affairs as Cassirer's monumental account.

Susanne Langer, perhaps Cassirer's greatest admirer and successor, has in turn developed to a remarkable degree and with awesome comprehensiveness the aesthetic and non-discursive implications of a view of symbolism akin to Cassirer's (one of whose monographs, Language and Myth, she first translated into English in the year of Cassirer's death, 1945). Langer's own development as a philosopher is striking, in that she was first noted as the author of a widely-circulated text on symbolic logic, but then became fascinated with the question of the import and significance of the non-discursive expression in artistic production, developing through a series of important works over several decades what is assuredly the most detailed examination of art, in an impressive variety of genres, ever undertaken by a ranking philosopher. Her two best-known contributions are Philosophy in a New Key (1941) and Feeling and Form (1953). Anxious to rescue art from the patronizing intellectual disdain with which its content has often been treated by experts dealing in more overtly "cognitive" or "discursive" modes of expression (including, obviously, most philosophers and logicians), Langer has in the process developed a complex view of mental functioning reflected in the three-volume treatment, Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, of which the first volume appeared in 1967, the second in 1973, with the third yet to appear.

The evolution of Langer's own concerns is not perhaps as surprising as it initially appears (i.e., from logic to art to the human mind), when one considers that in each case, she has been concerned with the concept of symbol, whether that symbol be the instrument of tight logical discourse or the source of shared significance in a dance or a piece of sculpture. The common theme that runs through her philosophy from logic at the outset to a comprehensive treatment of human intelligence several decades later is the symbol and its uses in the intellectual and spiritual life of mankind.

Langer is not much detained by Kant's problem in her aesthetic, symbolic, and mental studies, but insofar as the basic epistemological question interests her, she seconds Cassirer explicitly (Philosophical Sketches, 1961, p. 59),

pointing out the importance of symbols not just in communication but in "the formulation of experience." "It was," she tells us, "above all, Cassirer who recognized the part which symbolization, or symbolic expression, plays in the formulation of things and events and the natural ordering of our ambient as a 'world.'"

Like Cassirer's, her work is of importance within the context of the present essay first in lending credibility to the basic question it broaches. Almost two decades ago she wrote:

> The concept of meaning, in all its varieties, is the dominant philosophical concept of our time. Sign, symbol, denotation, signification, communication - these notions are our stock in trade. (Philosophical Sketches, p. 54)

But more importantly (since the question probably needs few endorsements), Langer, along with Cassirer, has sketched and charted appreciable parts of the landscape of symbol as the term is intended in the present essay and the further study which it proposes. That part of the task set (though not to be here resolved) in the present essay which would attempt an exodus from subjectivism, Langer does not really address except as noted a moment ago. But the larger part of the task that proposes a fuller account of the role of symbolic activity and even (to anticipate a later section of this essay) "symbolic interchange" cannot ignore the vast contributions already made by Cassirer and Langer toward an extensive appreciation and analysis of this role. If the present attempt succeeds in covering any ground (or even proposing any) not previously trodden by these giants of the field of symbolic theory, this possibility must derive from the stress to be laid here on the collaborative and reciprocal nature of symbolic activity in its most effective and rewarding settings, which alters both the character of the symbolism itself, as an object of inherent interest, and its contribution, under these circumstances, to solving or at least mitigating further the age-old Kantian problem of epistemological solipsism.

D. Other Conceptions and Treatments of Symbols

A comprehensive "review of the literature" of theory and speculation about symbols, symbolism, and symbolic activity would be a preposterous undertaking. Still, when one ventures into the waters of so well-travelled a shipping lane as symbolic activity, it is perhaps just as well to give some sort of navigational indication of the sorts of traffic with which one does not intend collision and will therefore take some pains to avoid. Furthermore, some parts of the vast international, interdisciplinary literature of the symbolic may eventually prove to be germane to a rounded view in ways not here anticipated. So as foe or even eventual friend, several main varieties of the theory and practice of symbols ought to be here promptly acknowledged, and at least at this

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stage of the present project, disavowed.

One is any serious discussion of the important microanalysis involved in contemporary general linguistics. Despite more than passing acquaintance with these arcane matters, this author does not propose here to look at language from so close up. Similarly, no serious involvement is intended here with "symbolism" as a special effect or authorial purpose in literature. Many professionals in the field of literary study and teaching are convinced that literary works are rife with symbols that ought to be diligently pursued and (once caught) analyzed by all conscientious readers of such works. I must confess little success in such undertakings and little conviction where I have been a guest of someone else's chase. I am pleased that a number of serious authors disavow the results of such analysis when applied to their own work.

The present essay can also provide no help and the proposed theory very little in connection with the straight-forward use of symbols in such areas as mathematics and science, or such treatments of language primarily from the point of view of symbolic logic as Carnap's Meaning and Necessity (1947) or Quine's Word and Object (1960). Such uses and such treatments would be important components of any "complete" theory of symbolism, but such a theory is assuredly beyond finite human capacity!

As in the case of the work of Carnap and Quine (with both of whom I was privileged to study), Freud's Psychopathology of Everyday Life and The Interpretation of Dreams stimulated my own earliest interest in questions of symbolism, but the psychopathological or psychotherapeutic use of symbols exceeds the intended scope of the present essay and perhaps even of the general theory which it will adumbrate.

There are heavy technical literatures of both myth and metaphor (the former including, of course, some of Cassirer's work) - topics which would have to be dealt with at some point in any general theory of symbol but which pose too many problems for inclusion within the present essay or perhaps even the general relatively modest theory and limited description here proposed.

These disavowals themselves do not, of course, nearly exhaust the varieties of research, theory, and speculation that might be invoked in useful and illuminating accounts or in any of a number of reasonably comprehensive or inclusive theories of symbolism in human affairs. As the theory that will be sketched in remaining portions of this essay suggests, symbolic activity is so endemic to the human species that there is probably more writing about the varieties of human symbolism, in one form or another, than about any other single topic which has ever occupied the attention of the species. Regrettably, most of this must be bypassed if one is to get beyond the endlessly fascinating but engulfing details of human symbolism and on to the central and underlying considerations that appear to animate

this ceaseless panorama of symbolic activity.

II. NOTES TOWARD A THEORY OF SYMBOLISM

A.
Mankind's Symbolic Nature

Human actions can be divided, from a certain vantage point, into two main types: direct and symbolic. Direct action is that which alters the physical world in overt and intended ways. Animals lower in the evolutionary scale than ourselves are limited, in general, to this kind of action, though some of the higher mammals forecast, in a kind of unintentional parody, what becomes full-fledged symbolic action in homo sapiens, and there are intimations, almost as far down as there are nervous systems in lower invertebrates, of the symbolic kind of action. This second kind differs from direct action in that its effects take place primarily within a nervous system. In the case of direct action, a nervous system mobilizes a muscular and skeletal system to those movements that alter the world around the actor. In symbolic action, there is no immediate intent to alter the world. The payoff of the action, so to speak, is within the nervous system itself.

The distinction requires many qualifications and is certainly not absolute, but it corresponds accurately enough, I think, to our intuitive distinction between "action" and "thought" so that it is, itself, deeply rooted in human experience. I am simply suggesting here that there is utility in extending the term "action" to the process of thought (including imagination, creativity, attitudes, and so forth) in a way that is also part of our common heritage as human beings. Thus we say that "thinking is hard work" - implying that it shares with muscular activity the characteristic need in the latter for effort, persistence, and so forth. So, again, there is no novelty in calling thought action. But doing so may obliterate a widely-made distinction between the two (or between "theory" and "practice") which is also a part of our common semantic tradition. Hence, the utility in retaining the term "action" for both physical action and thought, but only with a qualifier for each (direct, symbolic) to suggest its domain.

Now the first of two main theoretical tenets which I am proposing is that in our understanding of our own species we have greatly overestimated the amount of direct action carried out by homo sapiens and greatly underestimated the amount of symbolic action. This defect is, of course, by no means universal; and the twentieth century, particularly from its midpoint on, has seen the emergence of a host of doctrines and descriptions that lay stress on symbolic activity. As far back as 1941, Langer was telling us that "a new philosophical theme has been set forth to a coming age" and that "the power of symbolism is its cue" (PNK, p. 29).

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Nevertheless, almost four decades later, despite an unending stream of theoretical contributions within the areas of symbolism and of communication (which presupposes symbolism) and of the human intelligence itself (which invents and makes ceaseless use of symbolism) we are still prone, not just as a species but even on the part of the symbolic theoreticians themselves. to take for granted that nothing "short" of direct action is ultimately of any real consequence.

The plausibility of this lies in the fact that action which is confined to our <u>own</u> nervous system - for example, unspoken thought - is, indeed, of little consequence, in the short run, to anyone else. And any such action which never extends in any way beyond our individual nervous system may, fairly enough, be considered trivial or futile. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that any "strong" internal action is likely to go permanently without an exterior sequel of some kind. Interior actions (thoughts, notions, imaginings, hopes, plans, etc.) which are relatively pallid to begin with may, truly enough, never eventuate in anything, but this is not so much because we have failed to carry them into direct (i.e., external) action as because they did not seem worth such translation in the first place. Admittedly, some good notions may die for lack of conviction or of the habit of (or a suitable platform for) overt action - but it seems safe to suppose that in the self-editing process we all carry out on our transitory thoughts, the oblivion to which we ourselves consign most of them is well deserved by their actual degree of merit.

But what is far more significant is that symbolic actions are not, in fact, limited to the confines of our own personalities. I have already suggested that an action could usefully be viewed as symbolic if its effects take place primarily <u>within a nervous system.</u> The nervous system in question, however, need not be exclusively our own. Actions are symbolic, according to this view, if they work their symbolic design upon any nervous system. If the action is initiated by one individual but has its principal locus in a second individual, then we have an instance of communication. And a communication could be viewed as "purely" symbolic when its only intended effect is "within" the nervous system of another, or of all those others to whom the communication is directed.

This oversimplifies matters, of course, since we may hope, as communicators, that we will learn whether or not our message reached the intended receiver(s), and in this instance this information is itself <u>another</u> effect of the original communication - its "feedback," to use the fashionable term. But if the effects of an action are limited, in the short run at any rate, to nervous system consequences (including feedback as a sort of echo that returns to the sender), then the action is probably most usefully regarded as purely symbolic. The dividing line becomes fuzzy, however, if we extend short run to long run. Even our most random thoughts and casual communications are

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probably never totally devoid of various kinds of long-run purpose. One's strayest thoughts are, so to speak, candidates for membership in the total design of one's life; and the most perfunctory "How d'ye do?" or "Hi" to a casual acquaintance could be viewed not unreasonably as an attempt to establish or maintain one's reputation for comity and civility.

The issue, however, is not whether nothing at all is intended from the action beyond nervous system effects, but whether anything of consequence other than a nervous-system effect can be considered very likely at the time the action is undertaken. If a criterion of this sort is used, then it would seem that the great preponderance of human actions are probably symbolic rather than direct. This statement depends to some extent, of course, on what one identifies as "actions" within the flux of human behavior. Thus, if every inhalation and exhalation of breath is to be counted as a "direct" action, or every contraction of a muscle, then direct actions clearly occur more often than symbolic ones. The bias of typical human concern probably favors identifying precisely those segments of behavior as "actions" which are most "meaningful" and worth talking about - and these segments are among the likeliest to meet the criterion. But since they are ipso facto among the actions that are of the greatest interest to us, we would not go far wrong to say that at least the preponderance of important human actions tend to be symbolic rather than direct.

In many instances, however - perhaps most - there is, in fact, both a direct and a symbolic component in human action. A rescue mission, for example, to a neighboring country that has undergone a natural disaster is often of this hybrid sort. The action is originally undertaken as a "direct" one - to intervene physically in the catastrophic situation so as to ameliorate or mitigate its physical effects on behalf of the people involved. Such an action is clearly "direct" in a way that dwarfs at the outset any thought of its value in the cementing of an international friendship. But the memory of such an act of generosity may, in the aftermath of the physical events, loom as a more substantial thing even than the actual physical undertaking itself. In another instance the desire for good will between nations or individuals may be the initial impulse which then seeks a physical means of producing such an aftermath. The gamut of possibilities in relating direct to symbolic action is indeed as wide as human interests and ingenuity. The point in the present context is simply that the number of symbolic actions and the extent of the symbolic portion of hybrid actions is immensely larger than we are accustomed to think of it as being.

This underestimation of the degree of symbolism in human action, at least as perceived by common sense in ordinary situations, results, I think, from the strong and curious tendency of symbolic activity to erase its own traces from that which it accomplishes. Thus we rarely remember verbatim the complete text of even our most important personal

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conversations. The medium is, so to speak, not only not the message - it is not even remembered as contributing to it. And this, it could be argued, is exactly what characterizes a good medium or an effective message within it - its self-effacing quality vis-a-vis the central human "message" for which, alone, it exists.

This point seems to me crucial for appreciating the richness and almost magical efficiency of symbolic action. Direct action is, so to speak, just exactly what it is. It is the literal doing of whatever one does - no more, no less. If I add salt to water, I get a saline solution, and that is the complete essence of my action. If I put a burning match to a pile of dry leaves, they catch fire, and that too is the extent and scope of my action, unless (and of course this applies in both cases)...unless I invest these actions with some significance beyond themselves. My examples here are of a deliberately bland and neutral character, but they, or any other human action whatsoever, can become "symbolic" to me or to others provided only that we interpret the action as representing some possible object or state of affairs beyond itself. Thus if I am a chemistry teacher and I have put the salt in the water to illustrate the principle of solution, my action is symbolic. Or if I imagine that the dry leaves to which I set fire resemble a faded love affair of which I now wish to destroy the last traces in my memory, then the setting fire to them acquires a character quite different from the simple physical action which I have carried out.

The range of the things which may become significant and of the significances which they may acquire is, of course, unlimited. But this does not imply that just anything can mean just anything else. Complex semantic and psychological constraints make certain kinds and instances of symbolism much likelier than others. Many of mankind's most sophisticated activities consist in selecting appropriate symbols for a given significance or significances for a given symbol. Not only artists but all of us, in so far as we take any satisfaction in "taste" and "discrimination," are involved in the endless matching of symbol to significance in the flux of human activities.

For when we speak of "symbolism" in the sense here intended, we are speaking of nothing less than the entire ebb and flow of meaning in human affairs. There is some risk of tautology in any such talk - namely, that everything is viewed as actually or potentially meaningful, and that everything is therefore a symbol of something else, which is presumably a symbol of some further thing, and so forth in an infinite regression. This is not, of course, the intent, and any such interpretation of "meaning" ignores two crucial facts about symbolism. One is that every symbol is, in fact, a "thing" in its own right, with a "thingness" of some kind that logically precedes any meaning it may acquire through the processes of human symbolizing. Thus two things may quite easily be "symbolic" of each other - Damon and Pythias, Laurel and Hardy, Dante and Beatrice, such that the mention

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of one "evokes" the other. For symbols do not, in any simple-minded way, simply "stand for" that which they symbolize. They may suggest or evoke, by such relationships between symbol and "meaning" as pairing (in the examples given), reciprocity, direct opposition (black and white, positive and negative), and a host of others, the common trait being simply that one thing serves to summon or evoke the other. What is even more remarkable is that symbols and their meanings need not stand in any kind of one-to-one relationship to each other. There are important instances, of course, of "substitution" symbols, but these are a special case (as in the letters used in mathematics) rather than the general case. Indeed, the most striking kind of symbol is one which, though quite obviously "meaningful" in some important sense, cannot be fully explained by translating it into any particular "referent" which it is thought to represent. Most highly-esteemed works of art tend to be symbols of this sort: one may readily enough assign some particular "meaning" to them, but such a meaning does not exhaust the richness of the work of art, and alternative "meanings" are usually just as readily available from equally skilled interpreters.

The second fact that rescues from tautology the statement that symbolism embraces the entire ebb and flow of meaning in human affairs is that while the symbolizing object (i.e., the physical symbol: the word, the painting, the symphony) stays constant in its own right, the degree of meaning inputed to it in the symbolizing process varies enormously from time to time and from person to person. Accurate accounts of actual human symbolic activity, therefore, constitute chapters from a biography of the collective human spirit - the dynamically shifting pattern of human concerns and the tangible means by which those concerns are shared in the process of human symbolic interchange.

Symbols then, as the predominant mechanisms of human "meaning," are not simply the equivalents or counterparts of "everything that is important in human existence" - an arrangement that would be tautological. The degree to which a given symbol has meaning for us varies with circumstance, and, what is more, there are countless "meanings" in life that are not associated with any symbol. Those things in our existence that are unambiguously "real" - birth, sickness, sleep, procreation, injury, food when we hunger and drink when we thirst - all have substantial meaning without, in the sense I have suggested, being "symbolic" of anything. Even more strikingly, the people who are most important to us are important in their own right, and not as "symbols." All such meaningful instances of the reality that is central in our lives can, truly enough, be appropriated by our imaginations to acquire additional, symbolic meaning - but nothing in the concept of meaning implies symbol as its unique cause. Indeed, the "meaning" which a symbol has derives its initial strength from the meaning which reality has for us. To lose touch with this fact would be to cut the lifeline that lends to symbols and symbol systems the vitality that enables them

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to predominate in human settings.

The main first tenet in the view of human symbolism which I propose is simply that, in fact, human nature lends itself so copiously to the symbolizing process that symbol itself tends to become reality and to occupy the central role not just in our dreams (as Freud observed long ago) but also in our waking lives, where much that we take for reality is in fact obviously symbol, and much that we take as direct action is nothing of the sort but symbolic action instead.

And I intend no value judgment here. I neither deplore nor applaud what seems to me a plain matter of fact - often totally neglected in theoretical accounts of the species and nowhere yet fully appreciated. There may be some basis for admiring, indeed standing in awe at, the human capacity for symbolic activity, and there may be even more strikingly a basis for urgent counsel to the species to recognize this capacity and take account of it before accepting as fact, and often murderous fact, one or another kind of mythology masquerading as revealed truth and appearing to justify homicide on its behalf. But such judgments and exhortations are outside the theory itself and belong more appropriately in the concluding section of this essay, on possible practical implications.

If the central first tenet of the theory is correct, a host of other considerations and perspectives follow which the present essay cannot hope even to enumerate in any definitive way, let alone develop. If human symbolism is a sort of exotic seasoning to be added very sparingly to the roast beef and mashed potatoes of pedestrian, literal life, then we have one state of affairs, represented adequately enough, I think, in a variety of world views that prevail across the broad surfaces of our planet, most of them rather grim and fatalistic perhaps, but well adapted to the lot of a frail species on a precarious planet. This is the "economy of scarcity" view held equally by Malthus and Marx and newly legitimized in some of the current varieties of environmentalism. Mankind is conceived of rather tragically as a species operating in the general frameworks described in classical physics and biology, with a somewhat overdeveloped cerebrum which has led to temporary biological success now clearly doomed, however, by diminishing resources and by an inability to contain any longer an atavistic aggressiveness less and less appropriate to the superurbanization that is the curse of the democracies and the unfortunate goal of most of the third world as well.

But if mankind is, indeed, as many others have suggested, the brilliant innovator, symbolizer, and "nervous-system specialist" that I think the evidence of symbolic activity points unmistakably to, then we have quite a different state of affairs, in which it becomes increasingly important to understand exactly the still somewhat inscrutable (and probably comic rather than tragic) nature of Mankind the Symbolizer and to furnish a far fuller account than we so far have, from this point of view, of the

diversity of mankind's symbolic activities. The urge to symbolize, and the genius for doing so, seem to me clearly mankind's predominant and salient characteristic; and if this is indeed the case, we are greatly overdue for taking suitable stock of the situation.

What I have suggested so far, however, in this essay is not really unfamiliar ground in the contemporary theoretical and philosophical literature that addresses itself to mankind's essential nature. The philosophers of symbol and of language and some of the new anthropologists have given us reason to suspect that we have not yet estimated highly enough mankind's constructive and communicative resources, both those already abundantly exhibited and those that are still unfulfilled in a world that has so far taken symbolism lightly as an official view of things.

But in the section to follow, I shall introduce a somewhat novel perspective on symbolism and communication that may, I think, offer somewhat less familiar observations on these matters than I have so far suggested.

B. The Interchange of Symbolism

Accounts of epistemology and of human symbolic and communicative process from Kant's day to our own seem to me to have limited their focus to the individual thinker, knower, symbolizer, communicator. This is not unreasonable given the complexity of the matters involved. But it is also, I shall suggest as the second main tenet of the views I offer here, a very misleading framework for an appropriate analysis of the nature of human symbolism.

Certain theorists, most notably Cassirer, have given considerable attention to the social nature and origin of human symbols - but even Cassirer, it seems to me, has not considered the dynamic implications for the very nature of symbolism itself, of reciprocal communication. I call this simply interchange.

We recognize, of course, that communication is inherently interpersonal rather than isolated - that is, that more than one person is involved, even though one may truly enough talk to oneself in public symbols. But the theories of public symbols, from Kant's categories to Langer's "presentational" art, all concern what you as an individual, or I as an individual, express in these shared symbols. Kant wanted to know how the knower can know. Langer wants to know what the artist, giving voice to the inner mind that informs art, is saying. All of this is, so to speak, a transaction between a person's inner and outer reality. Now the question formulated in this way is enormously important, and the preceding section of this essay has suggested my own view that this connection between inner and outer reality is carried on by means of symbols, and that there is a great deal more of this symbolic activity in the world than any of us have grown up to expect or recognize.

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But what is offered in all such theory, including my own in the previous section, is paradoxically, a private account in public terms. Kant's categories are not so clearly "public" as they are "universal" - but the effect is about the same, at least if one can suppose that education refines the categories of the mind in any way. Once we reach the symbolic philosophers, we have at any rate a clear-cut case of public, learned, socially-derived symbols being used by the isolated individual to carry out his or her most private understandings of the universe.

Surely there is some incongruity here. If my most private life, my very consciousness (or even my unconsciousness!) is carried on by means for which I am totally beholden to my social environment, I must appear a prodigiously ungrateful and antisocial creature to let myself suppose that my private musings are of my own making. Indeed, some theorists, like Whorf and those he has influenced ("linguistic relativists"), would hasten to assert that my language, with which I do my thinking (assuming that one does think in language) is not really mine at all, but my culture's, and that my thinking is bounded by the limits of my linguistic culture. But one can reject linguistic relativism (on a variety of grounds - largely the fact that nearly any language can produce at least a circumlocution for what is only a little more concise in any other language) without rejecting the inherently social nature (or at any rate origin) of the symbols with which I soliloquize or voice forth my most intimate or idiosyncratic moods, musings, or meditations. Indeed, these symbols and symbol systems are "public" regardless of medium, genre, and mode: the musical scale, the artist's palette, the ballet dancer's basic positions, even the athlete's stance behind the line of scrimmage or at the plate - all these are inherited and employed by every new practitioner, in every type of human expression. There is difference and individuality in the combining of them, as my words differ in sequence from yours, but unless my words individually (and my phonemes if I speak and my letters if I write) are the same as yours - that is, are the same physical symbols as yours - then you and I cannot communicate and my inner life and yours are, for all practical purposes, at opposite ends of the universe.

Thus right from the outset, every symbol that I use is known intimately to you, whether in my speech (or writing) to you, or even in my thoughts to myself. Not all of my thought comes in language, of course, but till I get it into language (or whatever my most articulate medium is), ther I have no assurance, even to myself, that what I appear to be thinking is actually there. I confirm it to myself, as a meaningful thing, by casting it in public form, whether for you to hear directly, or simply (when I talk to myself) as if you were there to hear it. The very sentence that I write now must first pass my own public test for whether it is meaningful, and I could not presume to say whether it was or wasn't till I hear (or see) it in the English that I can tell (since you

and I share the same symbols) will be meaningful to you.

This much at least needs to be universally conceded by all theories of knowledge and of expression as integral to knowing and expressing - perhaps indeed even to experiencing - namely, that I do not know or express or (perhaps) even experience except in public symbols. Just as these symbols tell you what I mean, so they must first tell me (or I had better lapse quickly into silence till I get things straighter!).

But I would suggest as my second main tenet that the role of "public," or more accurately "interpersonal," goes in fact much further even than this - in that I am never fully articulate in my own right. It takes you to complete me, and vice versa. And to go even a step further, the way in which you complete what I am saying, indicating your understanding of it, what it means to you, is the very mechanism by which symbols become enriched until my set of them, and yours, if we are mature communicators, becomes the powerful repertoire or arsenal of the precise and effective communicator and therefore (and typically in this reverse order, I believe) thinker.

Unilateral communication, I suggest, eventually simply runs out of fuel. I am not here attempting to urge the virtues of gregariousness or the joys of togetherness, worthy though these causes may be. I am suggesting a much more basic dependency of thought and expression (or of experience and symbol) on the bilaterality and reciprocity of significant communication.

The present state of knowledge about "meaning" in language, let alone other media like art and music, is appreciably less than lucid and definitive. My tenet here proposes that a substantial and extraordinarily important part of the phenomenon which any satisfactory theory of meaning ought to account for is the degree to which my meanings are sharpened, honed, and fueled by the reciprocal communications in which I involve my verbal (or other) symbols and symbol systems. I don't mean by this that every time I talk about my ideas they grow more precise or my symbols more communicative. Far from it. What is needed by me, and by every thinker and communicator, is the kind of significant symbolic interchange with the necessary kind of people in which my own discrete and fragmentary forays of thought and expression can come to form, instead, a continuity, because in such interchange I am genuinely "understood" and vitally responded to - and vice versa for whoever constitute my appropriate partners in such interchange. Lacking this, my thought and my expression may or may not have "merit" and make sense, but whichever way they are, I will not know which till I become involved, at first or at last as the case may be, in the interchanges crucial for my own level and content of experience, thought, and symbolization of that experience and thought.

As a very simple example of the kind of thing I am suggesting, consider the range of denotations and

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connotations of a basic but rich English word like point, with somewhere around two hundred different meanings in an unabridged dictionary. How is one to learn all these meanings and to learn the shades of nuance that separate them from each other and from the meanings of closely related words? The only answer seems to be that one must become a native (or equivalent) speaker of English to have available the full range of opportunities provided by this one symbol among tens of thousands in the language. Studying the unabridged dictionary, however thorough and accurate its account may be, will simply not do instead. One must have the full experience of the habitual speaker and listener through years of saturation in anglophone culture - in short, even in this grossly simple example, interchange with the relevant people (i.e. in this case, bona fide native, or equivalent, speakers of the language).

But as symbols go, words are, despite their great complexity, fairly stable and well-behaved. The world is full of symbols that make point look like a small island of serenity. Some of these less sedate symbols are my ideas and yours - for an idea can be a symbol even as a word is, but a much more complicated one: more complex in expression (requiring, e.g., many words for one occurrence of it), more elaborate in its structure and architecture, and more ambitious and less predictable in its application to some still more complex framework of thought and discussion in which, as a word fits in a sentence, it fits (or attempts to do so) into a superordinate set or continuity of ideas, actions, or whatever. My ideas and yours, to the extent that they have any originality, are to that same extent less public than other "symbols" - and so they require more public exposure and validation (or the reverse) for you and me to be able to know what our thinking and expression actually, publicly, "mean." We understand our ideas, in some sense, when we first "have" them, but their public meanings come to us only through the rich bilateral processes in which our thinking takes some kind of place in the much larger schema of the world we live in.

Symbolic interchange, then, is a prerequisite to significant symbolic activity, which cannot possibly become airborne without the sort of diverse reciprocity which I am suggesting as integral to the sorts of process that have concerned the speculative tradition from Kant through Langer. One thinks immediately of the great historic instances of unilateral communication - massive masterpieces begun and ended by artists who sought no interim "feedback" - but a moment's additional thought is enough to establish that no important artist or thinker has ever lived who has not first immersed himself or herself in the field of thought or the artistic medium, almost invariably with extensive give-and-take during formative years, and then alternated periods of intense work (sometimes isolated) with an even wider immersion in the top-level professional milieu appropriate to the kind of work being done. One need only

think of Shakespeare's total immersion in the Lord Chamberlain's and King's Players; Beethoven's in the musical Vienna of Haydn, Mozart, and Schuppanzigh; Rembrandt's in the equally intense painting milieu of Leiden and Amsterdam, including the training of young artists under his own roof. Symbolizers of this calibre had no need, at least when they reached their years of mature production, for quick reactions from anybody - but how many thousands of "reactions" did each have "internalized" from the artistic environments from which they learned the artistic mode in which their own most significant thoughts and symbols would arrive.

But, illuminating though the great artists may be, one need only go to oneself for processes that are, in many ways, counterparts of their more spectacular ones. We all depend, I would suggest, for our own symbolic maturities on rich and responsive interchange in whatever areas of excellence as thinkers, reactors, producers, specialists, or even citizens we may lay claim to. Then, once we have learned, by such interchange, how to think and how to express what we have thought - then we may sit back a while and ponder what our lives and our experience mean, abstaining for a time from gregariousness to find out more about ourselves, only to seek, more ardently than ever, the kinds of interchange that are most meaningful to whatever it is that we are, least superficially, in our lives and careers as practicing "symbolists."

At this stage I offer only the slimmest intimations of how, exactly, such interchange alters the symbol systems in which we do our work and live our lives. I am content for the moment to suggest that symbolism is inevitably collaborative. The symbolic processes which Kant, Cassirer, and Langer have invoked to explain knowledge and its relation to experience and expression are social phenomena, not to be adequately understood within the framework of the individual, but only in the irreducible collectivity of people essential to the symbolic functioning of the individual.

And if I have managed to suspend disbelief, at least, in the human plurality of symbolizing, then it will also be apparent, I think, that the age-old problem of solipsism, Kant's problem, comes tolerably close to being resolved. If, as I sit here pondering whether anyone else exists, I stop to realize that my solipsistic question and the terms in which it poses itself to me are not of my own making, that they are derivative in their very nature not from my own genetic idiosyncrasy but from cultural symbols that I could not plausibly have developed, then I have, if not firm knowledge of the "existence" of the external world, at least a much stronger presumptive case for its existence.

Indeed, if one can calculate probabilities about what one might reasonably "know" from one's own inner or genetic resources alone, unaided by any other soul on earth, the least probable things in one's experience come from the most crucial episodes of "symbolic interchange"; and this means that we not only make at least some palpable headway on the

perhaps "absurd" but nonetheless philosophically stringent problem best posed by Kant, but also that all those overtones of despair and alienation which hover around any proposal of isolation are correspondingly diminished. And, in turn, the motives for "subjectivism," and the intellectual, spiritual, and artistic hazards which it entails, and from which as rigorous and recent a thinker as Cassirer could not extricate us, are correspondingly reduced.

C. Implications and Applications

What has preceded is at most the prospectus for a theory, not the theory itself, and the implications of an unformulated theory are necessarily somewhat moot. Nevertheless, one of the chief motives for theorizing is to generate concepts that have some fairly wide applicability. The present case is no exception, and therefore it may be appropriate to suggest, if only fleetingly, some of the kinds of yield which I see as a possible result from a definitive version of the concepts that are scarcely more than hinted at in the present essay.

Let me start with one that is quite personal. I am by profession an educator with specialty in the field of secondary-school English (or "Language Arts" as many prefer now to call it). After some two decades of involvement with this field, I have found myself deeply dissatisfied with what might be called the basic rationale of English as it is now taught. Such a bewildering potpourri of purposes plague the conduct of this subject in the secondary schools of the English-speaking world (and at other levels of education as well) that one would have no difficulty in finding competent professionals whose perspectives on the subject do not overlap at all - who might, to all intents and purposes, be teaching different subjects entirely. While some of this same kind of uncertainty may exist in some degree in other academic subjects, none can seriously rival English for pure ideological chaos. What has apparently been lacking in our field is any central core of concern such that it can serve to link the efforts of the diverse teachers and curriculum specialists who seem to me at present to be in some danger of being totally out of touch with one another. The English language, which has furnished the "name" of our subject, has clearly failed to be such a concern, as have the central notions of "literature" and "communication," each of which has its advocates within the profession. In general the "literature" advocates are hostile to the "antihumanistic" connotations which they find in the notion of communication as a unifying concept, while the communication advocates have been impatient with the "elitism" and preciousness which they attribute to those who see literature as the only serious matter within the field of English.

I see the theory proposed in this essay as offering some hope of reconciling the legitimate diverse interests of our

fragmented profession. "Symbol" is surely at the heart of much literary study of the least controversial kind, and it is equally central to any serious notion of language specifically or communication more generally. The working bond among dedicated English teachers has, in fact, been largely inarticulate - ironically for a field whose working members are individually among the most articulate of human beings. English teachers have simply not been able to say in any satisfying terms what it is, exactly, that they are all interested in, or that they think students would benefit by learning. A theory of symbolic action and of the interchange of significant symbols and symbol systems seems to me to come closer to this unspoken common bond than anything else I have encountered within the field of my own specialty. One might suppose that English has been muddling through without a conceptual core quite satisfactorily, but the crisis of the 1970's with respect to "literacy" has been very demoralizing to many English teachers, and there has been an active quest, I think, in the past half-decade for some kind of unifying notion that would enable us, as English teachers, to have a quick and unambiguous answer when we are asked what business we are in, or when we find ourselves wondering, during a bout of insomnia, what exactly it is that we are trying to do. I hesitate to speak for the profession, of course - and perhaps I speak here merely for myself. But I think I know my colleagues well enough to believe that there is active insistence on getting straighter the bases of the line of work we are engaged in - and I see the theory of symbolic interchange as a contribution to that sort of clarity.

A second ramification of the theory that I find perhaps the most fascinating has to do with the relationship that exists among and between the major diverse modes of expression, and more specifically what are known collectively as the "arts." Langer, of course, has done the most impressive work in this area, and of a sort more to the present purpose than most of the rest of aesthetics. Though all responsible aesthetic theory necessarily focuses to some extent on the means of expression as well as the "content" of art, and therefore on the "symbolic" nature of art, the working emphases in most aesthetic theory seem to me somewhat diffusely spread over a variety of questions peripheral to the one most strongly suggested by the conception of symbolic interchange: how does the medium of this or that particular art (or this or that mode within it) lend itself as a symbolic vehicle for the inner conception or vision which the artist conveys to a prospective viewer/ listener/reader, and would the same sort of vision permit an analogous symbolic translation of inner vision in a <u>different</u> medium? Could Beethoven, for instance, have composed what Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel? One presumes not, for hosts of technical reasons and perhaps some of a considerably more substantive sort. But there is some sense, which I think is not just vapid or romantic, in which one can at least intuitively perceive a common fundamental impact,

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sensibility, and perhaps even Weltanschauung in the work of Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Beethoven. All three are, in some basic sense, "humanists" (in one of that word's many meanings), masters of classic form who, above and beyond but also by means of their strong accomplishments in artistic form, managed, as it were, to infuse their artistic products with an overpowering assertion of individual human dignity in company with an irrepressible (though often unappreciated) sense of the comic. While my example may not ultimately be defensible (though I have studied its possibilities in considerable detail for some years), it may serve at least to suggest a wide variety of subsidiary questions having to do with the nature of basic symbol and content in music, art, and literature. Apart from Langer, studies in this area - that is, the comparative nature of media - seem to me to have muddled the questions by failing to identify the relationship between symbol and medium. The present paper is not at all a suitable forum for even broaching the main questions here, but the appropriate formulation of them and the directions in which one might begin to look for answers depend, I think, on some adequate state of theory within the domain of what I am calling symbolic interchange.

A third implication of the theory, which I consider quite central to its basic nature, is in the area of humor. The pyschology of humor is complex and controversial. From the turn-of-the-century views of Freud and Bergson to the present, there has been much activity but little consensus in the analysis and theory of humor. I would see the theory offered in this essay as contributing a perspective to at least that kind of humor associated with incongruity. We generally agree that there is always a potential for humor in the linking of two incongruous things within a single framework - but what are incongruous things? They are, it seems to me, items selected from two frames of reference that are conceptually quite distant from each other - horse racing and theology, for instance. An anecdote or cartoon, therefore, that links plausibly (within a <u>third</u> framework) the race track and the priesthood or ministry always has some humorous potential. Now a frame of reference could plausibly be viewed, it seems to me, as what I would call a "symbolic domain." Each such domain tends to develop its own central repertoire of interlocked symbolic concepts and symbols for those concepts, and each domain tends to be kept separate from every other - in the service of what we call "specialization." But specialization itself violates an abiding human quest for unity and continuity. Humor, I would suggest, is a device for linking or interlocking frames of reference (clusters of symbols) that, apart from the humor, would be kept separate in ways that may be pragmatically useful but are nevertheless repellent to one aspect of the human spirit. Thus P. G. Wodehouse links the domains of theology and wagering in a memorable short story ("The Great Sermon Handicap") that seems to reconcile the two disarmingly enough to be at least relatively inoffensive both to the

devout theologian and the confirmed horse player. The theory proposed in this essay offers, I think, a potential framework for analyzing the relationships that exist among conceptual frameworks.

And this, in turn, suggests a fourth extrapolation from the present theory for which I have some hopes. General Semanticists (Korzybski and his followers) began arguing some half-century ago that we ought to make sure that we do not confuse symbols with the entities which they symbolize - to take the word for the thing, for instance; and psychologists, in the same era, were pointing out the hazards of the process of "reification" (the tendency to assume that because there is a word, there must be a thing somewhere that corresponds to it). A competent theory of human symbolizing ought, it seems to me, to highlight the sort of distinctions between symbol and reality that can so easily become blurred in a passionate world. The theory which I am suggesting, particularly the tenet that we are all inveterate symbolizers, can serve, I believe, both to engender some appreciation of the astonishing symbolizations that mark, in certain instances, the highest intellectual and artistic achievements of the species, and the corresponding hazard that we may simply be swept away emotionally by our own efficiency as symbolizers. The world at present is heavily in the grip of a number of ideologies that are, I believe, basically symbolic artifacts, not chunks of "reality" or even accurate descriptions of reality. The fanaticism with which adherents of such ideologies are willing to kill and persecute on behalf of their views is an alarming source of instability and physical danger to every member of the species. But at present, we seem perfectly willing to concede that potent symbols offered as reality are a quite legitimate pretext for homicide and destruction. If these symbols were understood for what they are - an <u>interpretation</u> of reality, not "reality" itself, I think there is some prospect of defusing some of the murderous divisions within the global body politic. To "call the shot" on such fallacious uses of symbolism, however, requires a coherent theoretical explanation of the human process of symbolizing and of the scope of this process. At present, I think that the species lacks such a theory. What is proposed in the present essay might optimally furnish a few of the bricks from which such a badly-needed structure of human understanding of our own behavior might eventually be constructed. And it is none too soon for this.

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A BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

In an informal essay of the exploratory sort which this one has aimed to be, it would be inappropriate and I think heavy-handed to append a typical bibliography or list of "selected references." The text alludes to a substantial number of sources which I consider significant in relation to the matters discussed, but in general either these are so familiar as to require little further bibliographic data, or the necessary data have been included in the text. Kant, Langer, and Cassirer are thus documented in the text, and they are the most central to this paper.

For those who find interest in the ideas here expressed, I might mention two items of my own that relate some of the notions advanced here to educational theory somewhat more explicitly than occurs in the present paper. One is (though rather out of date) a critique of the usual linking of communication to teaching, under the title "Communication and the Act of Teaching: A Footnote to Models of Teaching," Journal of Teacher Education, XXII (No. 4), Winter, 1971, 418-425. The other is a somewhat different treatment of the basic perspective in the present paper, addressed to working English teachers, under the title "English and Human Nature," Alberta English (forthcoming).